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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000282

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SUBJECT: PRIORITIES AND CONCERNS OF IRAQI TRADE UNION LEADERS

Classified By: Labor Attaché OHara reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: At a rare meeting with key Iraqi labor union leaders in Amman, we challenged them to contribute to economic reform in Iraq, fight corruption, and focus on productive job creation. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the Iraqis agreed their deteriorating legal standing under the current interim government was their highest concern. They said that their bank assets have been frozen and that they were losing their properties. A high ranking official in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) said that he believed that National Assembly passage this year of a pending new Labor Code (approved by the Council of Ministers last December) would help resolve many of the legal difficulties faced by the unions. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) Embassy Baghdad Labor Attaché and Arab-speaking Embassy Labor Assistant met for over two hours January 15 in Amman with Iraqi trade union leaders. Represented were the Basra-based Independent Petroleum Workers Union, the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (Communist-Trotskyite), Kurdistan General Workers Syndicate Union and Iraqi Kurdistan Workers Syndicate Union and the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (the largest and most powerful union federation in Iraq). Also attending were representatives from Solidarity House, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the ILO. The meeting was facilitated by the Solidarity House Amman office that had already brought the Iraqis to Amman for a two-day leadership development workshop.

Our Challenge

¶3. (SBU) After some predictable initial venting against the US presence in Iraq, the discussion turned to what weighed most on the labor leaders' minds, namely their uncertain legal status under the current government. Overall discussion was animated. On our side, we spoke out for an integrated approach to economic reform based on anti-corruption, privatization, subsidy cuts and attracting investment both foreign and Iraqi. Without improvements in these areas, we argued that job creation remained difficult. We suggested that the union leaders risked marginalizing themselves if they tried to deny that economic reform in Iraq is urgently needed. Union leaders expressed enthusiasm for the discussion and asked for additional conversations.

Union concerns

¶4. (SBU) We were surprised to be told that the number one

labor union concern in Iraq today was neither poverty nor unemployment, but rather their allegedly deteriorating legal status under successive governments since March 2003. Union leaders told us that they had hoped the CPA would have eliminated the ban on public sector unionization by Saddam Hussein and were disappointed when nothing changed. Union leaders complained that CPA had tried to pick and choose a favorite union) this was a mistake. Furthermore, one labor leader said that he believed that the CPA had tried to keep the ILO out of Iraq and to prevent the ILO from trying to reform Saddam's labor laws. Union leaders were unanimous in condemning the labor policies of the current government. They alleged that government seizure of union buildings and freezing union bank accounts was a serious threat to the trade union movement's ability to collect dues or organize workers. The unions said that these measures are affecting both public and private sector unions.

¶ 15. (SBU) Less a threat and more a disturbing trend, they said, is that the leading political parties in Iraqi have been threatening the current independence of the labor movement by creating special labor wings to the parties. In the South, religious parties are creating religious trade unions that have begun threatening already existing independent unions. Other union leaders noted that high unemployment made it easy for managers to find replacement workers. They alleged that this affected their right to strike. Union leaders also complained that since March 2003, their occupational safety concerns had increased) not only from what they alleged is the deteriorating security situation but the &large amount8 of radioactive waste left behind by the US military. Also discussed and debated were privatization, the role of women in the work force, how to solve unemployment, the limits of centrally planned job creation, the importance of effective laws, the legal status

BAGHDAD 00000282 002 OF 003

of the labor unions, the importance of petroleum for Iraq, the negative impact of corruption on workers, and the need to combat increasing child labor.

Why Amman vice Baghdad?

¶ 16. (SBU) Previous Embassy contact with the labor movement has been limited to meetings at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs Headquarters building in Baghdad (also in the red zone but relatively safe). Meeting Iraqi union leaders in Baghdad is complicated. First, Iraqi union leaders have been reluctant for security reasons to enter the green zone for meetings here (Bombings at checkpoints to enter the IZ do occur.) Other union leaders are overtly anti-American and do not want to be seen as associating with the USG. Another problem, as one Communist Party member labor union leader told us, is that government of Iraq has begun seizing union buildings and that many unions do not have a place to meet us. In light of all this, we recently asked Solidarity House reps if they could facilitate a meeting for us with the Iraqi labor movement leaders the next time they had them in Amman and they agreed.

International Cooperation with Iraqi labor

¶ 17. (SBU) Working with the ILO and the ICFTU, the Solidarity Center has spent nearly two years bringing Iraqi labor leaders to Amman for training. The ICFTU and Solidarity Center have consciously decided to work with all trade union leaders and avoid favoring one union over another. ICFTU and Solidarity House reps, as well as Iraqi union leaders, criticized a CPA decision to &select8 the now defunct Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) as the &one8 officially accepted union. One Iraq union leader told us that the brutal murder of the IFTU international affairs

coordinator in early 2005 might have been caused by his high profile identification with Westerners. The union leaders who work with the ICFTU, the ILO and Solidarity House come from the north, center and south of the country, as well as the secular and ethnic communities, the communist party and other leftist organizations. Solidarity House does seek to encourage these diverse leaders to speak with one voice to influence current economic and political debates in Iraq. In fact, during the ICFTU and the Solidarity House sponsored meetings in Amman, the Iraqis found something to agree upon: opposition to the IMF and privatization (English language summary of statement blogged at www.jubileeiraq.org).

Ministry of Labor: new labor code needed

18. (C) Upon our return to Baghdad, we raised the legal standing of the labor movement in Iraq with high ranking MOLSA official. He acknowledge that this is a problem but said that a solution is in the works, namely a new labor code that "would bring Iraqi labor law into the 21st century." He said that passage of this labor law reform is a high priority of the current Minister of Labor and that after months of slow going, the Council of Ministers finally had approved it.

(He demurred when asked if we could see a copy.) The next step will be to get National Assembly approval. Both the ICFTU and Solidarity House have urged that this new labor code be approved soonest. They believe that this new law could provide the basis, as one rep told us, &the only free and independent trade union movement in Arab Mid-East region.

Unions: less independent and less national?

19. (SBU) Comment: The Iraqi labor movement has been intensely political with strong ties to political parties. Unions have also sought to be organized nationally across sectarian or regional lines. Even under Saddam, many union leaders were Communists while others made their peace with the ruling Baathist party. Today many Union leaders still maintain strong ideological and political party ties. In the case of the southern-based unions, there is a new element in the mix, namely growing relations with Iranians. One of the goals of Solidarity House is to foment independent trade unions that focus on bread and better issues and are independent of external ties whether it be to Iran, Turkey, or Syria. This will be a difficult task, as even among the few labor leaders we met, we saw a hints of a growing focus

BAGHDAD 00000282 003 OF 003

on regional issues and a greater receptivity to closer external relations with their neighbors.

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